

## **CELEBRATING A CENTURY OF CONSERVATION: *The National Wildlife Refuge System***

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On March 14, 2003, the National Wildlife Refuge System will be 100 years old. Over the next four months leading up to the Celebration, a monthly column will appear on these pages with facts and figures about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Following the five-part series, a quiz will be published about the Refuge System whose answers will have been provided in the monthly columns. On March 14, 2003, at the Holiday Inn, Detroit Lakes, we will host a public celebration commemorating 100 years of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Completed quizzes that are brought to the March 14 celebration will be put in a bin and a drawing conducted. The first quiz drawn that has all of the correct answers will receive a very special prize. Watch these pages for each month's article and save them on the refrigerator to assist you come quiz time! This is the second article of the five-part series and features Tamarac NWR, our area's oldest unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge was established on May 31, 1938, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Following lengthy discussion between government bureaus, and the involvement of a dedicated landowner, Tamarac became Minnesota's fourth National Wildlife Refuge, as a "refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife."

Prior to the Refuge's establishment, the Dust Bowl era, or the "Dirty Thirties," had left many lakes and wetlands dry. Declining waterfowl populations, catastrophic crop failures, and rural poverty were in the national spotlight. The Hamilton family had long been influential landowners in the area and held significant real estate interest in the Egg River Valley around Balsam, Tamarac, and Flat Lakes. J.E. Hamilton had a keen interest in waterfowl, wild lands, and hunting and eventually persuaded the government to use his lands in the Egg Lake country as a nucleus for a new refuge. Two government bureaus, Indian Affairs and the Biological Survey—which would later become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—debated land use regarding the area. In order to accommodate a new refuge, and relieve Bureau of Indian Affairs concerns, the "Collier Agreement" of 1935 was negotiated and eventually cleared the way for the new refuge that would be established by Executive Order in 1938.

Early development of the Refuge concentrated on surveying, clearing, and building roads and bridges to provide access to the new Refuge. Much of the work was accomplished by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), who began work in June of 1937, even before the Refuge was officially designated. Wildlife and plant inventories were important tasks, as was the construction of level ditching projects. Lumber was salvaged from old farm sites to construct a refuge headquarters. Poles were cut to bring in the new telephone line from Detroit Lakes, and fence posts were cut not only for local needs, but also to support Bureau of Biological Survey projects in the Dakotas. Several fire towers and water control structures were constructed as well.

Beginning with the CCC, the Refuge has hosted a multitude of jobs programs through the years designed to accomplish work and keep Americans working. From 1966 to 1969, a Job Corps Center operated north of Height of Land Lake and provided jobs for up to 200 people working on dike and other large construction projects. Though the camp is long since gone, the gymnasium from the Job Corps site is still in use today; it was sold to the Frazee School District for \$1 and is now the home of the Hornets.

Wildlife populations during the early years looked somewhat different than they do today. There were no nesting bald eagles, no Canada geese, and no trumpeter swans. Wolves, black bear, moose, beaver, otter, and wood ducks were scarce. Deer and muskrats were abundant, ruffed grouse and pheasants common. Seasonally, canvasbacks, redheads, and ruddy ducks were common as well. Sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chickens were year-around residents, with numbers peaking in winter as local birds congregated on the Refuge in response to food patches and shocked grain that the Refuge provided.

Today, through restoration efforts and management, the Refuge hosts healthy nesting populations of bald eagles and trumpeter swans, and of course, we are all aware of the Canada goose recovery. Wolf, black bear, beaver, otter, and wood duck populations have all recovered to healthy levels. The sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chicken are gone, casualties of the disappearing prairie.

Management of the Refuge today focuses on healthy forest management, prairie restoration, and environmental education and recreation. Since 1987, Tamarac NWR staff have also been involved with assisting private landowners with habitat restoration, resulting in the restoration of more than 1000 wetlands. The Refuge remains focused on its original purpose of providing a “. . . refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife,” but also provides compatible wildlife-dependant recreation consistent with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. Opportunities abound on Tamarac for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. The Refuge has a visitor’s center that was constructed in 1981 and has recently been remodeled with beautiful new displays.

Today, Tamarac NWR covers 42,724 acres of mostly wild country here in Becker County. The vision of decades past lives on because people cared enough to establish, nurture, and preserve this place. Come visit its wilderness; it is yours to enjoy!

For more information on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Refuge System Centennial, or the your National Wildlife Refuge System please visit our website at <http://www.fws.gov>.